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described in the song is the natural consequence: If we commit the sin of *karet* – cutting ourselves off from the roots of our purpose – then our "punishment" is that we are cut off from that which is the source of our life.

The song clarifies what divine attributes we must embody to fulfill our purpose: "Yeah, a faithful God, without iniquity, Just and upright is S/He" (Devarim 32:4). As we cross the Jordan to establish a political system and economy, the song demands that we remember the divine attribute of justice, through which Zion will be redeemed (Isaiah 1:27).

But with so many disagreements about its meaning, is not "justice" an empty word? I believe that this common argument is mistaken. We wildly exaggerate disagreements about justice. Throughout history, most people who shared language and territory also shared a sense of justice regarding many crucial issues. In our days, the sword, the dollar, and the digital word have transformed humanity into a species that shares both common languages and a common global interdependent territory. I believe we also share a sense of justice regarding certain critical points.

It seems clear that almost all people alive today believe they have human rights, such as the right to an adequate standard of living and protection from discrimination, and want their rights respected. In fact, the stories we tell about the alleged threats posed by minorities or immigrants to justify violating their rights implicitly recognize that were these threats not real then our behavior would be wrong.

Similarly, we tell stories about borders, sovereignty and private property to normalize our collective choice to leave trillions of dollars in the bank while billions of humans suffer unnecessarily. Our need to tell these tall tales implicitly recognizes that were they not true – or were they merely insignificant in the face of human suffering – we'd be obligated to invest what it takes to eradicate poverty.

We lack justice not because we don't know what it is, or can't afford it, but because the stories we tell obfuscate our responsibility. We Jews today must serve our purpose by utilizing the story-telling genius of our people to offer new stories that embody the message of Ha'azinu and motivate the struggle to eradicate all discrimination and poverty. Our Jewish communities contain vast spiritual energy. We must utilize that energy to sound the Song of Israel, with the clarity and force of a shofar blast, to our human sisters and brothers across the globe.



TORAH SPARKS

Parashat Ha'azinu

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Annual (Deuteronomy 32:1-52): Etz Hayim p. 1185-1195; Hertz p. 896-903
 Triennial (Deuteronomy 32:1-52): Etz Hayim p. 1185-1195; Hertz p. 896-903
 Haftarah (2 Samuel 22:1-51): Etz Hayim p. 1234-1238; Hertz p. 891-895

D'var Torah: Israel is a Purpose

Dr. Shaiya Rothberg, Conservative Yeshiva Faculty

In this week's parashah, the people of Israel stand poised to enter the Promised Land after generations of tribulations. At this critical juncture, God has Moshe teach us a song: Ha'azinu. The song must be "in our mouths" (Devarim 31:19) until we know it "word for word" (Ibn Ezra). It sounds like God and Moshe want us to chant Ha'azinu like a mantra as we cross the river Jordan to take on the responsibilities of a nation in the Land.

Rav Kook echoes this motif in his "Fourfold Song" according to which the People Israel herself is a song: The Song of God. It is a song, and not a philosophy, because while it expresses truth it also pulses through our bodies as only music can. We sing the song with the fullness of our minds and bodies to awaken humanity to her highest moral and spiritual potential. This is the divine purpose of Israel for Rav Kook.

Ha'azinu, too, is a song, and thus involves our hearts, our souls and everything we've got. The words tell a story: We will cross the river, inhabit the land, and enjoy prosperity. In our prosperity, we will forget God, betray our purpose, and therefore nearly be destroyed. In the end, we will return to God and be consoled (Devarim 32:43, following Rashi).

Why should this be our mantra? Because it instructs us that Israel is not – and must never be - merely a people, a religion or a land. **Israel is a purpose.** The song teaches that our divine purpose is not just our responsibility but also the source of our collective life and inspiration. Perhaps the divine punishment

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D'var Haftarah: Slow Change

Rabbi Mordechai Silverstein, Conservative Yeshiva Faculty

Paralleling the song of Parashat Ha'azinu, the haftarah this week is David's victory song from the penultimate chapter of the books of Shmuel. The same song is also found in the book of Tehillim (chapter 18) with minor variations. The last verse of this song is well known liturgically since it is recited at the end of *Birkat Hamazon* – the Grace After Meals. On Shabbat and holidays, we say the version from Shmuel: "A tower (*migdol*) of salvation is He (God) to His king, keeping faith with His anointed, for David and his seed, forever" (22:51), while on weekdays, we say the version from Tehillim: "Making great (*magdil*) the salvation of the king, keeping faith with His anointed, for David and his seed, forever." (18:51)"

The difference between these two versions is due to the tradition that the word made up of the letters "mem", "gimel", "daled", "yod", "lamed" should be read (*kri*) differently than it is written (*k'tiv*). Tehillim, following the way the word is written, renders it "*magdil*." Shmuel, following how it is read, renders it "*migdol*" (the "yod" is changed to a "vav"). Despite the Tehillim version (*magdil*) being more accurate/authentic than the Shmuel version (*migdol*), the simple meaning (*p'shat*) of *migdol* fits the context of the song better, since it is better coordinated with the imagery of the poem which often utilizes "stronghold" metaphors throughout to describe God. (Alter, The Hebrew Bible)

The Tehillim version (*magdil*), on the other hand, requires/invites rabbinic interpretation (*d'rash*). In Midrash Tehillim, Rabbi Yudan says: Since redemption does not come upon this people in a single moment, but rather a little at a time. So, what is the meaning of "*magdil*"? – that the redemption will grow gradually before Israel, for currently, Israel lives with great troubles, and if redemption were to come in a single moment, they would not be able to suffer it. This is why redemption is likened to dawn since it is never darker than immediately before dawn, and if the sun were to appear in a single moment, while everyone was asleep, fear would overcome them. Instead, the morning begins with a pillar of light before the sun gradually rises, leaving no one frightened." (adapted from Midrash Tehillim, Buber ed. p. 162)

Rabbi Yudan uses this textual curiosity as a means to teach us that redemption is ideally a process, an evolution of sorts. Otherwise, he notes, it would be destructive rather than productive. In this age of instant gratification, this is a powerful lesson that "slow change" - though frustrating - is ultimately the most sustainable.

Parashat Ha'azinu Self-Study

Vered Hollander-Goldfarb, Conservative Yeshiva Faculty

Most of our parashah is a poem that functions as a testimony and warning, telling about the relationship of the People of Israel with God at various points. The Hebrew in this poem is often archaic, making it difficult to understand.

- 1) 32:2 has 4 terms for God delivered water. What does such abundance of terms for such items tell us about the culture that spoke the language?
- 2) In the description of God's protection of the people of Israel, the image of the eagle protecting its young that is used (32:11). Why do you think that the vulture was chosen?
- 3) "They have roused Me to jealousy with a no-god; They have provoked Me with their nothingness; And I will rouse them to jealousy with a no-people; I will provoke them with a vile nation." (32:21)
 - a) How would you describe the relationship of God and the People of Israel as described here? What could have brought it to this point?
 - b) Why does God go through the trouble of describing a symmetric relationship? What is the value of such understanding of a relationship?
- 4) After delivering the poem, Moshe closes with a last warning to command our children to keep Torah, for this is the key to a long life in the land we are crossing into (32:44-47). Why is he stressing the children rather than his current audience?

At the Conservative Yeshiva in Jerusalem, we offer students of all backgrounds an opportunity to engage with Jewish texts in a dynamic, inclusive, and collaborative environment. We help students gain the skills necessary for Jewish learning and spiritual growth as individuals and in their communities in North America, Israel, and around the world.